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California's shadowplayers  
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# California's Shadowplayers

by NORMAN and MADELYN CARLISLE

Audiences have come away amazed and stirred by the performances of this courageous band of actors



THE DIRECTOR shook his head and told the actress, "No, that's not right. Make it a tender smile."

The attractive young girl on the stage turned toward him, a stricken look on her face. "I—I don't know how to smile that way," she said. "I've never seen a smile."

The Shadowplayers, America's most courageous actors, were rehearsing for another of the plays that have amazed and stirred West Coast audiences. For, though they stage regular productions without change in the action, the twenty members of this unique troupe of stage people are blind. Without strings to guide them, they play their parts with such sureness that audiences can hardly believe they cannot see the stage on which they are performing.

The story of the Shadowplayers really began ten years ago when the Downtown Lions Club set up a recreational center for the blind in the basement of a San Francisco Hotel. They hoped it would encourage those who came to it to engage in activities that would broaden their outlook and help them enjoy life more. It was an important idea greeted with gratitude by blind

people who had been helped with practical problems, like being trained for jobs, but who had never had anything like a social center.

One day in 1949, Lloyd Henderson, a young GI who had lost his sight in battle, and a few fellow members suggested that maybe the Center might add a dramatics group to its activities. The idea was unpretentious; perhaps acting in some simple skits would give some of the blind a new interest and help them with self-expression. They would be clumsy and probably wouldn't move much on stage, but nobody would ever see them anyway.

Certainly no one in the little group of eager students who greeted Björn Tolson, dramatics instructor sent by the San Francisco Department of Education, had any idea of what they were starting. Nothing in their backgrounds suggested that they could become actors.

Lloyd Henderson had played professional baseball until the war;



middle-aged Sarah Ballam had spent a lifetime in office jobs, and had only recently lost her sight; Wanda Roberts was a successful wife and mother, and Hilda Isles, who had been blind all her life, was a Braille teacher.

Among them, and the half-dozen others in the group, only two had ever had any dramatic experience, and that only of the high school or college variety. They would be eager students, perhaps, but this was about all that Tolson expected of them.

He started them out on passages from Shakespeare; then, as an experiment, gave them parts in some skits—just reading parts that would give them voice training. But when he suggested they stand in one place to read their lines, there was a murmur of protest from his class.

“Let’s *act* it out,” Lloyd Henderson suggested.

Awkwardly at first, but with good humor that let them laugh at their fumbling efforts, they tried it out—and liked it.

A few weeks later, carried away by enthusiasm as he watched their eager efforts, Tolson made a bold proposal. “How would you like to put on a play—a regular full-length one, costumes and all?”

There was a moment of silence, broken finally by Sarah Ballam’s hesitant question, “You mean for an audience?”

“Why not?” Tolson asked. “And we’ll charge admission, too. The Center could certainly use some extra money.”

The obstacles even to rehearsing “The Passing of the Third Floor

Back,” the play they picked, seemed insuperable. To begin with, how would the would-be actors even read their scripts? Hilda Isles had a ready solution to that. “We’ll have them typed in Braille.”

Formidable as the task was, her class in Braille typing tackled the job of turning out the hundreds of necessary sheets. While they were at it, they typed regular typewriter versions so relatives and friends could help the aspiring actors.

The most appalling problem was, of course, the difficulty of getting around the stage. How could the actors keep from bumping into each other or the props? How could they be sure they were facing each other as they talked? How could they even get on and

off the stage, especially those who never moved without the aid of a cane or a Seeing Eye dog?

Earnestly they discussed various solutions. How about being guided by dark threads that would be invisible to the audience? They discarded this idea, for they felt that trying to follow threads would distract them and be noticed by those watching. How about floor mats, placed at various spots to indicate the presence of furniture, and guide their feet to the right spot?

This would help some, they decided after trying it. But mostly they were determined that they would do it the hard way, by careful planning of movements and by counting paces from one stage position to another.

In the early rehearsals there were disheartening moments. Carefully learned lines were forgotten as the



players concentrated too intensely on the task of merely getting around. For some of them, like Hilda Isles, there was the baffling problem of registering facial expressions they had never seen.

The director solved it by adjusting facial lines to the proper angles with gentle fingers after the actors had felt the facial lines of other people demonstrating expressions. It was slow, patient work, but somehow the problems of each actor were solved.

Week after week, for three months, they pounded away, until finally they were ready for the big night. If there was a feeling of uneasiness among the actors, it was just as great among the audience that thronged the auditorium of the Blind Center.

Even Morton Kenney, director of the Blind Center, confessed he was worried. "I sat way up in the front row," he said, "so I'd be able to catch anybody who got lost and stumbled out over the footlights."

FOR MINUTES after the curtain went up, the tension in the audience increased. Then one by one the spectators eased back into their seats and an audible sigh of relief swept the house. For what they saw left them breathless. The actors were moving about the stage with easy, sure motions. Was it possible they were blind?

At the end of the first act, a roar of applause shattered the attentive silence. The players had done more than overcome their handicap. They had given the audience a new appreciation of the power of courage.

Thus the Shadowplayers got a stirring send-off for their amazing

enterprise. A few months later they took a bold plunge, staged "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" at the Curran, San Francisco's famed theater that is host to Broadway hits. The audiences that packed the theater settled all doubts about the future of the blind actors.

Since then the troupers, under Edward Stevlingson, have acted not only in San Francisco but have toured other Western cities. This year they daringly staged "Fumed Oak," Noel Coward's bitter comedy, at the ANTA-Monterey Drama Festival, in which top dramatic groups from all over California performed.

Here, under the scrutiny of fellow actors and Hollywood big names, they got such comments as this from Mel Ferrer, who has directed stars like Gregory Peck at his La Jolla Playhouse: "I've known professional actors who could learn something about sincerity from the Shadowplayers."

Dana Andrews, who watched them at the Festival, said humbly, "Seeing their spirit gives you a new pride in our profession."

Their tours have given the Shadowplayers new headaches that might have discouraged a less resolute band. The worst problem is quickly learning about a new stage. Coming into a town with only a few hours to get acquainted with the new platform may call for a change in their counting of paces. And the danger that some stage prop may be moved from its assigned position always haunts them.

In one case, in the haste of scene-changing on a new stage, a champagne glass was moved a few inches from its usual location. When the



actor confidently poured liquid from a bottle to fill the glass, there was no glass there. In another case, a liquid-filled glass was mixed up with another one that was empty. An actress hoisted the glass with a flourish and was drenched.

The Shadowplayers have developed a remarkable sense of audience reaction. Partly, of course, they can judge as would any actor, by such things as laughs at the right time. Their trained ears tell them by the lack of rustling noises whether audiences are listening attentively. But above that, they feel an emotional contact with their public that they report as "one of the most wonderful rewards of our acting experience."

The Shadowplayers feel that one of their greatest accomplishments is to impress people with the fact that the blind can take care of themselves. "Maybe," says Leland Jen-

kins, who happens to have a good job as an employee of a local department store, "if people see what we can do, some blind people will have an easier time getting decent work. After all, jobs are one of our big problems, and we think we'd get better ones if people knew our abilities."

Feel sorry for themselves? Not the Shadowplayers. They are much too busy with their acting to have time for that. Instead, they are thinking more about other people's troubles, and are planning more performances like the ones they staged in Reno. These were benefits for the handicapped—but not for the blind. The sightless actors and actresses turned the proceeds over to the Lions Club to buy hearing aids for deaf children.

"Those poor youngsters," says Lloyd Henderson, "are the ones who really need help."

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